

Chapter 24

The World at War (1941-1945)

Times of Crisis

In the first months after Pearl Harbor, the Axis Powers – Germany, Italy, and Japan – seemed unstoppable. Japan quickly occupied most of Southeast Asia and seized strategic island throughout the Pacific. In the Atlantic, German submarines sank three or four ships every day. And in Eastern Europe, Hitler's forces stormed into the Soviet Union, pushing all the way to the city of Stalingrad on the Volga River.

To fight back, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union forged a strong alliance. They (and a host of smaller nations) called themselves the Allies, with a capital "A." Believing that Germany and Italy posed a greater threat than Japan, the Allies agreed on a "Europe first" policy. They would devote the bulk of the resources to the European war. In the Pacific, they would buy time with an "aggressive defense." Once the Allies had gained the upper hand in Europe, the planners agreed, they could pour more resources into the Pacific War.

Dark Days in Europe

Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 met with great success at first. German forces swept rapidly eastward, capturing more than a million Soviet soldiers and driving the Red Army back to the edge of Moscow.

As diplomats and panicky citizens fled the capital, the Soviets launched an impressive counter-offensive. Aided by heavy December snows and frigid temperatures, for which the Germans were not prepared, the Red Army saved Moscow and stopped the Germans from advancing further.

To the north, however, the Germans had surrounded Leningrad and held it under siege throughout the winter of 1941-1942. Residents, having run out of food, starved to death at a horrendous rate of 4,000 a day. By the time the Red Army finally broke the siege of Leningrad, more than 600,000 civilians had died.

Meanwhile, German troops had occupied the Balkan nations in southeastern Europe, driving British forces off the Greek mainland and the Mediterranean island of Crete. In the southern part of the Soviet Union, the Nazis broke through the Soviet defenses and swept toward the oil-rich region near the Caspian Sea.

The conquered nations felt the full force of Hitler's ruthless policies. To free Germans for military service, the Nazis rounded up hundreds of thousands of men and women to work as slave laborers in German war industries. Such brutality drove thousands of European civilians into resistance movements against Poland, France, and other occupied countries. Resistance agents used sabotage, assassination, and other weapons to harass the German occupiers.

The Mediterranean and Africa

The Russians, desperately trying to stem the tide of the Nazi advance, pleaded with the United States and Britain to attack Hitler from the west. By establishing a second front, the Allies might divert German forces from their assault on the Soviet Union. But in 1942 the Western Allies felt they did not yet have the resources to risk a full-scale invasion of the European mainland. Instead, they would attack Axis forces in North Africa.

German and Italian forces had seized a great stretch of North Africa, from Tunisia to eastern Libya. By so doing, they threatened British-controlled Egypt and the Suez Canal – Britain's lifeline to its Asian and African empire. Leading the Axis forces was the Nazi's most skillful general, Erwin Rommel, nicknamed "the Desert Fox." Rommel sent his famed Afrika Korps smashing eastward toward Egypt in May 1942. British forces retreated deep into Egypt. Mussolini was so sure of an Axis victory that he had his white horse shipped in to be ready for a victory parade through Cairo, the Egyptian capital.

At the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, however, British forces under General Bernard Law Montgomery halted the German advance. Rommel, outnumbered and desperately short of supplies, retreated hundreds of miles across the North African desert. The tide of war was beginning to turn – and not just in North Africa. In Churchill's words, "Up to Alamein we survived. After Alamein we conquered."

Allied Victories on Two Fronts

As Rommel's retreat churned up the Egyptian dust, the Allies stopped Axis offensives in two key places, the Soviet Union and North Africa. In the Soviet Union, the German invasion came to a bloody halt at the city of Stalingrad. The Battle of Stalingrad saw some of the fiercest fighting of the war. Beginning in September 1942, small units of German and Soviet troops fought hand to hand in almost every building and alley. All the while, constant bombing and artillery fire were reducing the city to rubble. A Nazi lieutenant wrote, "The street is no longer measured by meters but by corpses. Stalingrad is no longer a town. It is an enormous cloud of burning, blinding smoke; it is a vast furnace."

Then in November 1942, a Soviet armored attack surrounded the German forces in Stalingrad. After three months of fighting, the tattered and freezing German survivors surrendered in February 1943. Having lost some 300,000 front-line troops in the Stalingrad campaign, Germany would never again be able to mount a major successful offensive on the Eastern Front. But the Soviets had paid a steep price for victory. In the fight for Stalingrad they had lost more than 500,000 soldiers and civilians – more people than the United States would lose in the entire war.

Meanwhile, in North Africa, General Dwight D. Eisenhower of the United States led a British-American invasion of Axis-controlled Morocco and Algeria. Eisenhower pushed eastward and Montgomery advanced westward from Egypt, trapping Rommel's Africa Korps between them. The Axis forces surrendered in May 1943. Rommel escaped, but some 349,000 German and Italian soldiers had been killed or captured.

The North African victory meant that the southern coast of Europe now lay open to Allied attack. By mid 1943 the Allies were everywhere on the offensive.

Japan's Pacific Offensive

Like Germany, Japan enjoyed tremendous success in the early part of the war. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was part of the offensive against British and American positions throughout Asia and

the Pacific. Key targets included American bases in the Philippines and the important British naval base and Singapore.

When Japanese troops seized Manila, capital of the Philippines, in January 1942, American and Filipino troops had to withdraw to the Bataan Peninsula and Corregidor Island. They fought on, taking many losses. At last, greatly outnumbered and cut off from outside support by air or sea, roughly 12,000 American and 65,000 Filipino forces surrendered to the Japanese in April and May.

The Japanese led the prisoners on a brutal forced march of 65 miles over tortuous terrain to a prisoner-of-war camp. Between 7,000 and 10,000 Allied prisoners were clubbed, shot, or starved to death. News of the Bataan Death March, as it was called in the United States, further enraged an American public already infuriated by Pearl Harbor.

Halting the Japanese

The surrender of the Philippines was the bleakest hour of the Pacific war for Americans. Japan seemed unbeatable. It had seized 300,000 square miles of ocean in six months. It was poised to attack Australia, and might even invade the United States. Americans on the West Coast kept a nervous lookout for Japanese invaders. At this early point, with the American war machine just getting into gear, the Japanese navy had three times as many ships as the United States.

Two crucial battles in mid-1942 halted Japan's expansion in the Pacific. In May, at the Battle of the Coral Sea, Allied forces blocked a Japanese push toward Australia. This battle, fought entirely by aircraft, was the first in naval history in which opposing ships never came within sight of each other. The next month, in June 1942, a Japanese armada of more than 100 ships attacked an American naval base on Midway Island, a stepping-stone on the way to the Hawaiian Islands. Included in the fleet, which was led by Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, were five aircraft carriers loaded with hundreds of warplanes.

The United States Navy gained control of the Battle of Midway because Admiral Chester Nimitz knew exactly where the Japanese fleet was going. American code-breakers had intercepted key messages. Unlike the decoded messages prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, this information was used successfully.

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As at Coral Sea, the fighting at Midway was done by warplanes. Both sides suffered heavy losses. But the decisive moment came when American dive-bombers attacked and sank four Japanese carriers in a matter of minutes. The crippled Japanese Fleet was forced to retreat, and Midway Island remained in American hands.

Taking the Offensive

The American triumph at Midway marked a turning point in the Pacific war. Henceforth, American forces began to drive the Japanese back to their home islands.

As the Allies advanced on key Japanese possessions, these remote, jungle-choked islands became scenes of death and destruction. William Manchester, a marine who fought in the Pacific, recalled:

Some islands were literally uninhabitable... and the battles were fought under fantastic conditions. Guadalcanal was rocked by an earthquake. Volcanic steam hissed through the rocks at Io. On Bourgainville, bulldozers vanished in the spongy, bottomless swamps, and at the height of the fighting on Peleliu the temperature was 115 degrees in the shade.

The first allied offensive took place at Guadalcanal, one of the Solomon Islands. Guadalcanal's importance lay in its location – close to both Australia and New Guinea. In August 1942 a force of 20,000 American marines stormed ashore. Their goal was to root out the Japanese and seize control of the island.

The Marines suffered agonizing setbacks. When the Japanese sank four out of five Allied cruisers, support ships withdrew, stranding American troops on Guadalcanal without naval gunfire and supplies. For four months they remained isolated, under Japanese bombardment from sea, air, and ground. After some of the toughest fighting of the war, much of it hand-to-hand, the marines began to gain the advantage. The surviving Japanese fled the island in February 1943. Victory over Japan, however, was far in the future.

War and the Home Front

In many ways, World War II's effects on American society mirrored those of World War I. The economy boomed as industry began churning out war supplies. The federal government took a more active role in economic planning. Groups such as blacks and women found new opportunities for advancement. And wartime tensions threatened the civil liberties of some Americans.

The Internment of Japanese Americans

American involvement in the war changed many lives. Among those affected almost immediately were Japanese Americans. The war inflamed a long tradition of racism against people of Asian ancestry. The governor of Idaho, said, for example, "A good solution to the Jap problem would be to send them all back to Japan, then sink the island."

Many believed that Japanese Americans would act as spies or saboteurs, although there was little evidence to back such beliefs. Most people of Japanese descent living in the United States at the time of Pearl Harbor had been born as American citizens.

In February 1942, President Roosevelt ordered the army to round up some 110,000 citizens and aliens of Japanese ancestry. These people, most of whom lived among the West Coast, were put in "relocation centers" – in effect, concentration camps. Families being relocated were not allowed to take any of their major possessions with them. Many lost homes and businesses during their period of internment (imprisonment). There was little privacy in the camps, and whole families were made to live in single rooms.

Peter Ota, age 15, was one such Japanese American who was forced to leave his Los Angeles home. Together with his 12-year-old sister and his father, Peter was sent to a camp in Colorado. His mother was too ill to go. After a while, Peter was released occasionally to work on a farm or in a factory. When Peter's mother died, he went to California, under military guard, to get her body. "When they marched me through the train stations," Peter recalled, "the people recognized me as being Oriental.. I heard 'dirty Jap' very distinctly."

Like some 33,000 other Japanese Americans, Peter Ota eventually joined the armed forces. Beginning in 1943 the American government began recruiting Japanese Americans for military service. Nisei battalions – units made up of second-generation Japanese Americans – served with distinction on European battlefields.

The Supreme Court upheld internment throughout the war. Four decades later a federal commission determined that the internment “was not justified by military necessity.” In 1988 Congress apologized for the wartime mistreatment and voted to pay \$20,000 in compensation to each person still living that had been interned. Spark Matsunaga of Hawaii, a Japanese American who was among 69 senators supporting the apology, rejoiced. The action, he said, removed “one great blot” on the Constitution.

Building Up the Armed Forces

At the time of Pearl Harbor about 1.5 million Americans served in the armed forces. By the end of the war the armed forces were 12 million strong. Fifteen million men and women of every color and creed served at some point in the war. Almost every family had at least one member in the military. Not since the Civil War had so many Americans been so personally touched by the war.

After Pearl Harbor, thousands volunteered for service. Despite overwhelming support for the war, however, most “GIs” entered the military through the selective service system – the draft. The average age of American soldiers in World War II was 26. In the Vietnam War, by contract, the typical soldier was 19.

In earlier wars, women had served with the military as clerks or as nurses. In World War II they received full status. Creation of forces like the WAAC (Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps) came over loud objections from people such as a congressman who wondered who would be left at home to do “the humble homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself.” One writer reported, “At most bases the WAACs lived in guarded, barbed-wire compounds which they could leave only in groups escorted by armed guards.” Such precautions were thought necessary to keep soldiers from constantly trying to socialize with them.

Despite such obstacles, women made a significant contribution to the American war effort. They worked as nurses, ambulance drivers,

radio operators, mechanics, and pilots – nearly every duty not involving direct combat.

Mobilizing the Economy

World War II put an end to the Great Depression, and once again the economy boomed. The gross national product jumped from \$91 billion in 1939 to \$212 billion in 1945. In 1940, more than 8 million workers had no jobs. By 1944 unemployment had dropped to 670m000. Employers were desperate for help. Signs urged restaurant patrons, “Please be polite to our waitresses. They are harder to get than customers.”

Of course, the armed forces provided many of the jobs. Equally important were the industries that made weapons and war supplies. As these industries grew, so did their need for workers. Many employers found people with handicaps to be excellent war workers. For example, some factories hired the deaf to work around loud machines. Airplane-makers hired midgets to inspect the interior of airplane wings.

To a greater extent than ever before in American history, the federal government managed the economy. It decided what to make, who would make it, and how certain scarce products should be distributed. Presiding over this enormous enterprise was the War Production Board (WPB), which President Roosevelt created in 1942. The War Production Board organized the shift of the economy to wartime production. Factories that had made nylon hose began to make nylon parachutes. Manufacturers of cars turned out tanks and airplanes. A gigantic Ford plant at Willow Run, Michigan, began work on its first B-24 bomber a week before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Soon it was sending forth a new airplane every 63 minutes.

Government contracts most often went to large corporations like Ford and General Motors, WPB officials said those firms were best suited to produce war goods quickly and in great volume. Critics replied that smaller companies could have produced just as efficiently. In any event, the result was to sharply increase the power of big corporations. In 1940 the 100 largest companies made 30 percent of all manufactured goods. By 1945 that figure had jumped to 70 percent.

“We Will Fight On To Victory!”

Where did the government get all the money it spent on the war? About 40 percent came from taxes. Congress raised the income tax and extended it to millions more people. In 1939 only 4 million Americans – people like bankers and professionals – paid income tax. By 1945, factory workers and others of modest means also had to pay taxes. Some 42 million Americans were on the tax rolls.

The government had to borrow the rest of the money it needed. Patriotic citizens bought billions of dollars worth of war bonds to finance the war effort. As in World War I, national debt rose dramatically during the war years.

The government set up a system of rationing to help hold down prices and manage shortages of scarce products. Each family got a supply of ration tickets to hand over whenever it bought goods like meat, butter, and gasoline. People grumbled about the inconvenience, but it was better to have some of those goods than none at all.

To get more food, people spaded up lawns and planted “Victory gardens.” A woman in Long Beach, California, recalled, “There was a large vacant lot and everybody got together and had a gigantic communal Victory garden... They’d give things away to everybody. Nobody said, ‘This is mine.’”

But not everyone was high-minded. Some advertisers saw patriotism as a sales gimmick and tried to persuade customers that even everyday products aided the war effort. A maker of women’s hairpins took this effort to extraordinary lengths: “She wears proudly – this badge of courage. It helps her face a shattered world with a calm valor and deep faith... It’s a silent eloquent way of saying, ‘There must be no letting down. We will fight on to victory!’”

A Turning Point for Women

Most women had more to think about than hairpins. Vast numbers took jobs vacated by men who had gone to war. During the Depression, with jobs scarce, Americans had discouraged women from seeking jobs. “Don’t take a man’s place,” was the attitude. But with the boom in wartime manufacturing and the loss of millions of male workers to the military, employers eagerly recruited women.

Peggy Terry was a Kentucky woman who went to work in a plant that loaded anti-aircraft shells with gunpowder. “My mother, my sister, and myself worked there,” she later recalled. “Each of us worked a different shift because we had little ones at home. We made the fabulous sum of \$32 a week... To us it was just an absolute miracle. Before that, we made nothing.”

The female labor force swelled by about five million during the war, a jump of almost one-third. Like Peggy Terry, about half of the new workers went into industrial jobs. Women worked as welders, taxi cab drivers, crane operators, police officers, chemists – wherever there was a need.

Women seized these new opportunities with enthusiasm, but their experience was not entirely positive. They usually earned much less than men, even in jobs that were exactly the same. Another grievance was the lack of day care for children. And finally, women were told in a variety of ways to think of their work merely as a temporary necessity, a wartime duty. Psychologists and magazine writers said women would be happy to return to the home at war’s end. But many women resisted. If they were fired from a wartime job to make room for a returning soldier, they kept looking until they found a new job.

African Americans on the Home Front

“V for Victory” was everybody’s slogan. It appeared on countless posters, and people greeted one another with a two-fingered V salute. African Americans called for a Double V – a victory against fascism overseas and against racial discrimination at home.

In 1941, as military spending began to climb, the jobs that opened up were mainly for whites. One aircraft plant told job applicants that blacks “will be considered only as janitors and other similar capacities.” The military, meanwhile, segregated black soldiers and generally assigned them to low-level, rear-area jobs. As one black recruit put it, “We can take no pride in our armed forces. We can become no more than flunkies in the army and kitchen boys in the navy.”

Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, vowed to fight job discrimination. He planned a giant march on Washington on July 1941 to demand equal access to defense jobs

and the “right to fight” in the military. A few weeks before the march was to take place, President Roosevelt met with Randolph and made a deal. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802. The order prohibited discrimination in war industries – although not in the armed forces. In return, Randolph agreed to cancel the march.

By creating a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to enforce his order, Roosevelt helped to open up new jobs for blacks. But the FEPC had few enforcement powers, and many white employers and union leaders continued to discriminate. Randolph and other black leaders kept up the pressure throughout the war.

Blacks in the armed forces were never allowed to forget their “second-class” status. A soldier named Lloyd Brown recalled the time he and other blacks were refused service at a lunch counter in Salina, Kansas. “We just stood there inside the door, staring at the German prisoners of war who were having lunch at the counter... The people of Salina would serve these enemy soldiers and turn away black American GIs.”

About one million black men and women served in the armed forces during World War II. The military remained segregated, and most black units had non-combat duties. As the war went on, however, blacks made slow gains. Some black units distinguished themselves in battle, and during the Battle of the Bulge blacks and whites fought side by side in integrated units.

Mobility and Racial Tension

World War II caused major population shifts within the country. Men and women in the armed services were often stationed at bases far from home. The demand for workers in booming industrial centers attracted thousands of southerners, white and black. California and Michigan, with their abundant defense jobs, drew the largest number of migrants.

One result of this mobility was to heighten the already tense relations among America’s diverse ethnic groups. In the summer of 1942 almost 250 racial conflicts broke out across the country. The worst was in Detroit, where racial rioting took the lives of 26 blacks and 9 whites. Order was restored only after authorities brought in 6,000 federal troops.

Also during that summer of 1943, racial violence against Mexican Americans broke out in Los Angeles. White sailors on shore leave, restless and bored, began attack Mexican Americans. Their particular targets were the young men, mostly second-generation Americans, who wore flamboyant “zoot suits” and “duck tail” haircuts. Neither the city nor the military police did anything to stop these attacks.

The riots went on for a week. They stopped when the government finally declared downtown Los Angeles off limits to navy personnel.

Toward Victory in Europe

By 1943 the Allies had brought the Axis advances to a halt. Now they were ready to take the offensive against Germany and Italy.

A Sea and Air War

The North Atlantic was a death trap during World War II. A sudden torpedo could send any ship to the ocean floor in a matter of moments. Scrambling into a life raft, a sailor might be machine-gunned by an enemy aircraft or submarine. Or he might be blown into the ocean, to flounder alone in an icy swell and die quickly of the cold.

The German aim in the Battle of the Atlantic was to prevent food and war material from reaching Great Britain and the Soviet Union. At the start of the war, groups of German submarines – called “wolf-packs” – almost drove Allied shipping from the Atlantic Ocean. In 1942 alone they sank the American coast. At stake was nothing less than the Allied lifeline to Europe. If German subs had continued to sink ships at the rate they achieved in 1942, Britain and the Soviet Union would not have received enough food and arms to continue fighting.

With grim determination, the United States and Britain fought back. Destroyers stepped up escorts of merchant-ship convoys. Air patrols helped to spot and attack enemy subs. New inventions also helped. For example, radar and sonar used radio and sound waves to locate enemy subs. By the spring of 1943 the Allies had gained control of the Atlantic, and the supply ships ran with only occasional losses.

Meanwhile, Allied air forces based in Britain were striking deep into the German heartland. The Allies hoped to cripple the German war economy with attacks on military targets. They also pulverized such major cities as Cologne, Hamburg, and Berlin in an attempt to sap the German people's will to fight. Despite massive destruction and heavy loss of life, German morale held firm.

Taking Italy

At a January 1943 conference in Casablanca, Morocco, Churchill and Roosevelt agreed to continue fighting until they won an unconditional surrender from the Axis Powers. That is, enemy nations would have to accept whatever terms of peace the Allies dictated. (This was in contrast to World War I, which had ended with a negotiated armistice.) The two leaders also agreed to postpone for another year the full-scale invasion of France that Stalin was demanding. First, they would strike from the south against what Churchill called "the soft under-belly" of Hitler's Europe.

In July 1943 a huge force of 160,000 American and British troops left North Africa, heading for the Italian island of Sicily. Meeting little resistance, the Allies moved on to attack the Italian mainland. Mussolini's government crumbled, and a new Italian government surrendered to the Allies and offered to help fight the Germans.

Hitler was determined not to lose Italy. He ordered a large German force to block the Allied march up the Italian peninsula. Aided by skilled generals and mountainous terrain, the Germans slowed the Allied advance to a crawl. The allies did not take Rome until June 1944, and German forces continued to fight in northern Italy until the final surrender.

The invasion of Italy eased the pressure on Soviet forces by engaging Germans who might otherwise have fought on the Eastern Front. But Stalin would not be satisfied until the Western Allies had mounted a full-scale invasion of France.

Invading Europe

At Tehran, Iran, Late in 1943, the "Big Three" Allied leaders met together for the first time. Roosevelt tried his best to win Stalin's

favor, playfully calling him "Uncle Joe" and backing his plea for an early invasion of France across the English Channel. Roosevelt and his generals were eager to finish off Germany. Churchill, on the other hand, wanted British and American troops to attack southeastern Europe first. Churchill feared that if Soviet troops reached southeastern Europe before the Western Allies did, British influence in that region would be ended. Nevertheless, Churchill finally agreed to an invasion of France.

As the date for the invasion (code-named "Operation Overlord") approached, nearly 3 million Allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen crowded into southern England. Makeshift camps dotted the countryside, and men and women in uniform swarmed through the streets. While preparations for such a massive operation could not be kept secret, General Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied forces, managed to keep the Germans guessing about where the Allies would strike. Thus German commanders were unprepared on D-Day – June 6, 1944 – when the largest sea borne invasion force in history landed in the Normandy region in Northwestern France.

Under cover of dark, paratroopers dropped behind German lines to sabotage lines of communication and transportation. At dawn, with 11,000 planes providing air cover, the first wave of Allied troops stormed ashore. The Germans put up heavy resistance, but the Allies still landed more than 300,000 men in the first week alone. Within a month the number rose to 1 million.

Having gained a foothold on the continent, the Allies punched across northern France. Another Allied force landed in southern France and pushed northward. On August 25, 1944, the Allies marched into Paris, ending four long year of Nazi occupation of the French capital. A few days later, British and Canadians took the cities of Brussels and Antwerp in Belgium. Within a few months of D-Day the Allies had liberated all of France and massed 3 million soldiers along Germany's western border.

By winter of 1944, Allied forces were closing in on Hitler from both sides – the British and Americans from the west, and the Soviets from the east. It seemed that victory was just a month or two away. But in mid-December 1944, Germany made one last-ditch counteroffensive, attacking along a weakly defended stretch of the Ardennes Forest in Belgium.

The German drive caught the Allies off guard. Allied troops beat a nasty retreat, creating a huge bulge in the lines, and so the fighting became known as the Battle of the Bulge. Despite heavy losses, the Allies finally managed to regroup and drive the Germans back.

A Meeting at Yalta

As the Allies pushed toward victory in Europe, they worked out plans for the future. In February 1945 an ailing Roosevelt met Churchill and Stalin at Yalta, a Soviet resort on the Black Sea. The Big Three made decisions at the Yalta Conference that helped to shape the postwar world. Some of those decisions contained the seeds of future troubles.

Roosevelt's top priority at Yalta was to work out the details of a new international body to help maintain the peace. The League of Nations had failed, Roosevelt believed, because the world's major powers had not supported it. He got Stalin and Churchill to agree with him on the basic structure of a new peacekeeping body.

Roosevelt also won Stalin's secret pledge that the Soviet Union would declare war on Japan within three months after Germany surrendered. American military advisers believed this to be crucial. For if the Japanese mainland had to be attacked by American forces alone, as many as a million American soldiers might die. In exchange for Stalin's promise to help defeat Japan, Roosevelt and Churchill gave Stalin territorial concessions. They agreed that the Soviet Union could occupy Outer Mongolia and several important Japanese islands.

The leaders also discussed new postwar borders for Poland and Germany. They agreed to divide Germany into four military zones, with the Big Three and France each controlling a zone.

Finally, the Yalta Conference produced some vague agreements on the fate of Eastern Europe. The Big Three promised to set up governments there that were "broadly representative of all democratic elements." When Stalin later imposed pro-Soviet governments in Eastern Europe, some Americans would accuse Roosevelt of "selling out" to communism at Yalta. Others would claim that because Stalin would never have accepted anything less than total control over Eastern Europe, the Yalta agreements represented the best deal possible at the time.

Victory in Europe

As the Allied leaders left for home, Churchill noticed that Roosevelt seemed "placid and frail." Yet no one realized just how frail. Two months later, on April 12, 1945, Roosevelt died of a stroke while at Warm Springs, Georgia.

Harry Truman took over as President. This former Missouri senator had been picked as Roosevelt's running mate in 1944. Truman, who had served as Vice President for just a few months before Roosevelt's death, had not even been involved in top policy decisions. Suddenly, he was in charge. All too aware of the terrible burden he was assuming, Truman remarked, "I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me."

Hitler's propaganda minister jubilantly announced, "My Fuhrer, I congratulate you! Roosevelt is dead! It is written in the stars that the second half of April will be a turning point for us." But the stars did not favor Hitler. As infantry units squeezed Germany on the ground, Allied bombers rained down destruction from the sky. Already in February of that year, Allied fire-bombings had turned the city of Dresden into an inferno, killing 135,000 people.

Collapsing German resistance in the west presented the Western Allies with a dilemma: How far eastward should they push? Though the Soviets were wartime allies, some Western leaders foresaw a postwar rivalry with the Soviet Union. Churchill argued that the farther east the Western Allies got before shaking hands with the Soviets, the less power Stalin would wield in Eastern Europe after the war. Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower had a different view. He wanted to end the war as quickly as possible and with the fewest casualties. This meant mopping up German forces left in the west rather than launching new offensives. Eisenhower's position carried the day.

On April 25, 1945, American troops met Soviet forces along the Elbe River, 60 miles south of Berlin. A few days later, Adolf Hitler committed suicide in a Berlin bunker as Soviet troops were battling to capture the Nazi capital. On May 7, at Eisenhower's headquarters in France, a German commander signed an unconditional surrender, ending the war in Europe. On May 8, 1945, people around the world celebrated V-E (Victory in Europe) Day.

Advancing on Japan

By 1943 the Allies were beginning to push the Japanese back to their home islands. The Allied drive followed two main paths. One, lead by Admiral Chester Nimitz, approached Japan from the east directly across the islands of the central Pacific. The other, led by General Douglas MacArthur, advanced toward Japan from the south – through New Guinea and the Philippines

Island Hopping in the Pacific

Nimitz used a strategy called island-hopping. Rather than invade every Japanese-held island, the Allies planned to capture only a few strategic ones. The rest, cut off from resupply, would no longer pose a threat. Starting with Guadalcanal, the allies attacked important island groups one after another, using each new group as a base from which to attack the next.

Nimitz's forces began their campaign in the Gilbert Islands late in 1943, advancing to the Marshall Islands early in 1944. In the summer of 1944 the Allies moved on to the Mariana Islands, capturing Guam and Saipan. Now, Allied forces were within striking distance of Japan. Soldiers began building airfields in the Marianas from which B-29 bombers could attack Japan.

Return to the Philippines

General MacArthur had been commander of the Allied forces in the Philippines at the time of the Japanese invasion in December 1941. When American and Filipino forces had their backs to the wall on Bataan, President Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to go to Australia. MacArthur went, but he pledged, "I shall return."

In October 1944, after two years of bloody fighting in the malaria-ridden swamps of New Guinea, MacArthur fulfilled his promise. Wading ashore on the Leyte Island in the Philippines, he made one of the most famous statements of World War II: "People of the Philippines! I have returned... Rally to me."

But the Philippines were not easily regained. Japan scraped together most of its remaining ships and planes in a desperate attempt to block the American invasion. What followed – the Battle of Leyte Gulf – proved to be the largest naval engagement in history. The United States won a smashing victory, wiping out Japan's fleet once and for all.

As the Battle of Leyte Gulf raged, a bomb-laden Japanese plane zoomed straight at the U.S. ship *St. Lo*, crashing through the flight deck and touching off explosions that sank the ship. For the first time the Japanese were resorting to attacks by kamikazes – suicide pilots who intentionally crashed their planes into American ships. (Kamikaze, meaning "divine wind," refers to a typhoon that destroyed a Mongol fleet trying to invade Japan in the 1200s.) During the final year of the war, kamikaze attacks sank or severely damaged more than 300 U.S. ships and killed 15,000 American servicemen.

With the Japanese fleet destroyed, U.S. troops cleared the Japanese from Leyte and in January 1945 invaded the mainland Philippine island of Luzon. After weeks of bitter combat, much of it in the streets of Manila, American forces gained control of the Philippines.

Mainland Asia

The Allies battled Japan on the Asian mainland as well as in the Pacific, but progress in Asia came more slowly. Driven all the way back to India by the Japanese attacks of 1941 and 1942, the Allies struggled doggedly to recapture northern Burma. Their aim was to reopen the Burma Road and bring supplies to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese government, which was resisting the Japanese invaders in China. With the Japanese in control of Burma Road, the Chinese depended on courageous American pilots who flew supplies "over the hump" of the Himalaya Mountains.

By early 1944, U.S. General Claire Chennault had set up airbases in China from which to fly bombing raids against the Japanese. Later in the year, Allied troops advanced into northern Burma from the west and north. With island-hopping forces closing in on Japan from the Pacific, Japanese commanders had to shift troops to meet the Pacific threat, and the tide of the war on the mainland began to turn.

In Asia, as in Europe, the war had brought Communist and non-Communist forces into alliance. Two Communist leaders – Mao Zedong in China and Ho Chi Minh in Indochina – had thrown their efforts into the struggle against Japan. But as victory approached, Allied leaders feared that wartime alliances might break down. Chinese Communists and Nationalists had only papered over their differences, and a full-scale Chinese civil war might break out at any moment. Indochina's future too seemed clouded. Ho Chi Minh was a popular figure opposed to any return of his homeland to French colonial control, and he was determined to win independence. You will read more about Mao and Ho in later chapters.

On Toward Tokyo

While MacArthur's troops approached Japan from the southwest and Nimitz's forces battled their way across the Pacific, American submarines and bombers were wrecking the Japanese war economy. Because Japan had few natural resources of its own, it depended on shipping for food and raw materials. Submarine attacks took a deadly toll on Japanese merchant ships. Meanwhile, beginning on November 1944, lumbering B-29 bombers began flying regular bombing raids from Saipan, Tinian, and Guam against Japanese cities. By the start of 1945 Japan was hard put to supply itself with food, let alone war materiel.

In February 1945 U.S. marines landed on the tiny island of Iwo Jima, just 750 miles from Japan. The marines advanced without air cover against a honeycomb of underground Japanese positions. In the Battle of Iwo Jima they suffered 25,000 casualties, including 6,800 killed. In some units as many as three men out of four were killed or badly wounded. But the Americans finally triumphed, with heroic marines planting the Stars and Stripes atop Mt. Suribachi, the island's highest point.

The next steppingstone to Japan, the island of Okinawa, was a mere 350 miles from Japan. The Battle of Okinawa began in April 1945 and turned into the bloodiest island fight of the Pacific war. Eventually some 300,000 Americans poured ashore, supported by 1,300 ships. By the time the marines gained control of the island in June, 110,000 Japanese and some 12,000 Americans had been killed.

The capture of Okinawa provided the United States with more airbases for raids against Japan. American pilots began systematic fire-bombing of the cities of Tokyo, Yokohama, and Osaka.

The Manhattan Project

To understand the next step on the Pacific war, we must look back to the year 1938. In that year, an Austrian physicist, Lise Meitner, and her colleagues discovered a way to split uranium atoms. By breaking the microscopic atoms into even smaller particles, the physicists could release a sudden burst of energy. Scientists around the world were quick to see the military potential of this discovery. If the energy of the atom were harnessed in a bomb, it could be the most destructive weapon ever invented.

Many of the scientists who fled Hitler's Nazi regime feared that Germany might make such a bomb. Albert Einstein, one such refugee, was the most famous scientist of the age. In 1939 he signed a letter to President Roosevelt, warning him of the atom's potential and suggesting that the United States begin to develop an atomic bomb.

Roosevelt put teams of scientists to work on a crash project to build such a bomb before Hitler's scientists could do so. To mask the nature of the top-secret undertaking, authorities gave it an innocent name – the Manhattan project. Four years of frantic efforts produced an awesome weapon. In a blinding flash of light on July 16, 1945, the first atomic bomb exploded in a successful test over the New Mexico desert. The Atomic Age had dawned.

War's End

President Truman had the responsibility for deciding how to use the monumental new weapon. Truman had not even known of the bomb's existence until he became President a few months earlier. It would be one of the toughest decisions a Chief Executive would ever face.

How could the United States use its awesome new weapon to put an end to the war? The bomb might make an invasion of Japan unnecessary, thereby saving millions of Japanese and American lives. But what was the best way to use the bomb?

Some of the Manhattan Project scientists suggested a way that would not added to the toll in human lives. They urged the President to invite Japanese officials to witness a new test explosion in a deserted area, so they could see the bomb's immense power. Surely that could convince the Japanese to surrender.

But there were only two more bombs. Could the United States take the risk that one or both would be a dud? Truman thought not. His prime concern was avoiding the bloody cost of a full-scale invasion, and he believed the bomb would have to be used as a weapon of war.

Truman sent a letter to the Japanese declaring that if they did not surrender they could face "prompt and utter destruction." Japan's premier wanted to accept the ultimatum, but he was unable to persuade military leaders to surrender.

Therefore, Truman ordered that the bomb be dropped on a Japanese city. On August 6, 1945, a B-29 – the Enola Gay – took off from Tinian Island in the Marianas carrying one atomic bomb. It headed for Hiroshima, an industrial city of 245,000. The plane dropped its bomb without warning at 8:15 AM. The fierce blast devastated the city and sent a mushroom cloud 50,000 feet into the air. Americans estimated the blast killed 80,000 civilians; the Japanese put the figure at 200,000. Tens of thousands more suffered at the painful and lingering effects of radiation poisoning.

Still Japanese military leaders refused to surrender. Two days after the destruction of Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded the Japanese-occupied Manchuria. A day later, on August 9, a U.S. plane dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki. That city too disappeared in an inferno of pulverized building and bodies.

On August 14, Emperor Hirohito announced to the Japanese people that he was planning to surrender. The war came to an end September 2, 1945, when the Japanese signed the surrender papers aboard the American battleship *Missouri*.

The Wreckage of War

In 1945 the world emerged from the ruins of war to confront a new age. Tens of millions had died, either from battle or from deliberate murder. The balance of power in Europe and Asia had been

overturned. There existed new opportunities for peace, but also new dangers of conflict.

The Costs of War

No one knows how many people died as a direct result of World War II. Estimates of the total war dead range from 40 to 60 million people. One thing is certain: at least as many civilians died as combatants. The Soviet Union, for example, lost 18 to 20 million people, at least 10 million of whom were civilians. At least 6 million Germans died, as did 2 million Japanese. China lost more than 2 million and Britain about 400,000.

On the fighting fronts, the United States suffered 291,000 killed and 670,000 wounded. But the home front also sustained heavy casualties. The rush to churn out planes and tanks and other goods contributed to job accidents that killed nearly 100,000 American workers and permanently disabled 1 million more. An astounding 3 million workers suffered lesser injuries. On-the-job injuries are not just a wartime problem, of course. However, World War II temporarily reversed a trend toward greater job safety that had gathered speed in the 1930s.

The cost in material resources was incalculable. In Europe and Asia, the war reduced cities to rubble and demolished railroad, highways, and factories. It destroyed priceless works of art and turned majestic cathedrals into piles of stone. But the United States escaped such damage. Of the major powers, it alone emerged unscathed. In fact, the massive government spending of the wartime years had stimulated the American economy and spread a glow of prosperity.

The Holocaust

People had known all along that the war was taking a terrible toll. Still, the full agony only became apparent when Allied forces entered Nazi territory and liberated dozens of concentration camps. Soldiers could not believe their eyes. They found prisoners so emaciated that they resembled living corpses. They found gas chambers, crematoriums (ovens in which bodies were burned), and thousands of corpses stacked like cordwood in boxcars and open pits. One soldier recalled:

The odors, well there is no way to describe the odors... Many of the boys I am talking about now – these were tough soldiers, there were combat men who had been all the way through the invasion – were ill and vomiting, throwing up, just at the sight of this.

News of the mass murders had filtered out of Germany early in the war. Most people, however, had found the reports unbelievable – too terrible to be true.

After *Kristallnacht* in 1938, Hitler's ruthless anti-Semitism should have been clear to the world. Nevertheless, Jews fleeing Germany had trouble finding nations that would accept them. The United States, having adopted tough immigration restrictions in the 1920s, showed little desire to make exceptions for European Jews. Other nations were just as hard-hearted.

By 1939 only about a quarter of a million Jews remained in Germany. But other nations that Hitler occupied, especially Poland and Russia, had millions more. Obsessed with a desire to rid Europe of the Jews, Hitler backed a policy of genocide against the Jewish people.

When Germany invaded Russia in 1941, Hitler sent *Einsatzgruppen* – mobile killing units – to kill as many civilians as possible, especially Jews. The *Einsatzgruppen* alone murdered about 1.5 million Jews. But the solution to “the Jewish problem” was too slow for Hitler. He ordered the construction of death camps to kill masses of people more efficiently. The Nazis rounded up Jews, put them on trains, and sent them to concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and other places. Age and gender did not matter. The Nazis killed women, men, children, infants, and the elderly.

Some of the camps used prisoners as slave laborers. Prisoners built or worked in factories to profit the Nazi regime. But as soon as they weakened or grew sick, they were murdered.

At Auschwitz, the Nazis killed hundreds of thousands who had been shipped in by train. Whip-wielding guards herded the Jews into building, had them strip naked, and forced them into the gas chambers. The Nazis were able to gas more than 12,000 people *per day* at Auschwitz.

Of the 12 million civilians the Nazis killed, about 6 million were Jews – a third of the world's Jewish population. This program of mass murder has been known as the Holocaust.

Defining International Law

The Allied nations expressed outrage at the horrors of the Holocaust and vowed to punish those responsible. They pointed to other international crimes too – the aggressions that began the war, the atrocities of the Japanese in Bataan and China, and more. But what court could conduct the trials?

Soon after peace came, the Allies formed two International Military Tribunals – one at Nuremberg, Germany, and one at Tokyo – to put enemy leaders on trial. They charged the defendants with violating international law by committing “crimes against peace,” “war crimes,” and “crimes against humanity.” Because of the hideous revelations about the Nazi death camps, attention focused mainly on the Nuremberg Trials. Of 24 leading Nazis placed on trial at Nuremberg, 12 received the death sentence. In less-publicized trials throughout the occupation zone, U.S. judges convicted more than 500,000 lesser Nazis. Their penalties ranged from small fines to imprisonment in labor camps.

The Tokyo court sentenced Japan's wartime premier, Hideki Tojo, and six Japanese generals to be hanged. Several hundred other Japanese convicted of war crimes were also hanged.

Some people have argued that the war crimes trials did not go far enough in seeking out and punishing war criminals. Many Nazis who took part in the Holocaust did indeed go free. Some re-entered German civilian life and other found refuge in foreign countries, including the United States.

However imperfect the trials may have been, they did establish an important principle – the idea that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own actions, even in time of war. Nazi executioners could not escape punishment by showing that they were “merely following orders.” The principle of individual responsibility is now firmly entrenched in international law.

Returning from War

By the time of the war crimes trials, Americans were drifting back to the everyday life that the war had disrupted. Some would look back on the war years as a time of adventure and daring excitement. Other who had lost limbs or loved ones would feel the heartbreak and anguish for year to come. But few would be unmarked by their wartime experience.

For some, the war had revealed a dark side of human nature. Japanese Americans like Peter Ota could not shake the bitter memories from their minds:

I think of my father... After all those years, having worked his whole life to build a dream – an American dream mind you – having it all taken away... His [fruit and vegetable] business was worth more than a hundred thousand. He sold it for five... He died a very broken man.

Yet the war also evoked human kindness and hope. Alex Shulman, a U.S. Army surgeon, recalled the time during the Battle of the Bulge when he treated a teenage German soldier whose skull had been punctured:

He... started to cry. I said, “What are you crying about?” He said, “They told me I’d be killed. And here you are, an American officer, washing my hands and face and my hair.” I reminded him that I was a Jewish doctor, so he would get the full impact of it.

For many, the war meant a chance to break out of old molds. “The war changed our whole idea of how we wanted to live when we came back,” said a soldier from the New York area. “All my relatives worked in factories. They didn’t own any businesses. They worked with their hands. High school was about as far as they went.” Taking advantage of a 1944 law called the GI Bill of Rights, that soldier and thousands of other soldiers went to college and built successful careers. They became accountants, engineers, and pharmacists. Said the soldier, “We just didn’t want to go back and work in a factory in the hometown. The GI Bill was a blessing.”

The GI Bill bought books, paid tuition, and provided living expenses for veterans who attended high school or college. It was one

of a number of laws that offered a broad range of benefits to veterans – loans for buying a home or setting up a business, preference in seeking a government job, and so on.

Mexican Americans had won more medals for valor than any other ethnic minority. From their war experiences they had gained skills and confidence. No longer willing to accept second-class citizenship, they began to organize politically. A leader in this struggle was Dr. Hector Garcia, a Texas veteran who created the GI Forum. Its aim was to fight discrimination against Mexican American veterans.

A Clouded Future

The end of the war also brought new evaluation of American’s place in the world. By 1945 two nations – the United States and the Soviet Union – stood head and shoulders above the rest. Despite its great losses in the war, the Soviet Union wielded colossal military strength. The United States possessed even greater power, as the atomic bomb confirmed. Truly, these were two superpowers – as they in fact came to be called.

Although the superpowers had fought as allies against a common enemy, they still eyed each other with deep-seated suspicion. Ideological differences – communism versus democracy – were only part of the problem. The economic and political goals of the superpowers clashed in Europe, Asia, and other part of the world. One man returning to the United States in the spring of 1945 observed, “War with Russia is unthinkable, yet it is being thought about constantly. It is, in fact, American’s great fear.”

It was to avoid a “postwar war” that President had championed a world body to replace the League of Nations. He saw the new United Nations organization as a sort of police force for the world. He thought the UN would only succeed, however, if the victorious Allies worked together.

The UN’s structure reflected Roosevelt’s belief that great-power cooperation would be essential. Five major powers from the anti-Axis coalition – the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, France, and China – had a veto in the decision-making Security Council. The veto allowed any of the five to block a UN action it opposed.

Two weeks after Roosevelt's death, the founding conference of the UN opened in San Francisco. Delegates from almost 50 nations quickly drafted a charter, and in July 1945 the Senate approved American membership by a vote of 89 to 2. This time there was none of the quarreling that had kept the United States out of the League of Nations after World War I. The American people believed that their nation, which played such a crucial role in the war, had an equally crucial role to play in the peace.